

THE LOOTERS

By Perceval Gibbon

The Story of a Thrilling Night in Paris and Its Bizarre Aftermath.

AT the back of the room, beyond the marble-topped counter of the American bar—America is to the bars of Paris what England is to her tailors—the little tables were spaced widely; the clientele of the place were of that kind which frequently needs privacy. Without, the moderate traffic of the Rue Daunou, the leakage from the spate of the boulevard, oozed past its door; within, two or three ornate ladies sat each alone at a table with her untouched glass of liqueur before her, motionless, wordless, sunk in a seeming of gentle melancholy, and in the furthest corner Mr. James Smith held forth across his table for the enlightenment and profit of his two young friends.

"Neumann!" he was saying in accents of surprise. "Pony Neumann! Mean to tell me you don't know Pony Neumann? Well, you certainly ought to know Pony. It's an education for any man!"

He himself was a man of about 30 years of age, bullet-headed and thick in the neck. His clothes and linen had a showy sumptuousness; the whole of his accoutrement was choice and costly, and with it went that manner of sophistication, that art of gesture and attitude, which is only acquired to perfection by those to whom bars and race courses and gaming houses are the familiar landmarks of life. His blunt featured face had a sort of callous cheeriness, but neither the graces of his manner nor the gloss of his equipment availed to hide the feral and dangerous quality that inhabited the man as a flame inhabits a lantern. Of his two young companions, one looked like a jockey and the other like a curate; nevertheless, neither was a horseman nor an ecclesiastic.

"Well, what about 'im?" queried the counterpane curate, restively. "What is 'e, any 'ow?"

"What is he?" echoed James Smith. "He's everything that you're not, me lad, and everything you'll never be. When you're talking about Pony you want to be careful; he's got more friends than a pretty millionaires, and I don't know the man that can say he ever got the better of him. Fellers like you—"

"But what is 'e?" interrupted the other. "What's 'e do? Us three—well, Tim an' me, our game is smashing stummers; you're a jeweler, but what's this 'ere Pony? That's what I was askin'!"

"O" Mr. James Smith was mollified. "Well, I don't know just what you'd call him. He's in a class by himself. January till March, you'll find him at Monte Carlo or Biarritz; then a month or two in Paris; then over to London for the season and back to Trouville or Ostend about August. Then he'll trot off to Carlsbad, maybe, an' in the winter you're likely to hear of him at Calde or thereabouts. Wherever the swells are—the real swells and the real money—there you'll find old Pony holding his own with the best of 'em and not losing by it, you bet! Why, if that feller was to write a book, there'd be scores of 'em—scores, I tell you, from lords an' bishops an' birds o' paradise o' that kind down to members o' parliament an' stock brokers—that 'ud never be able to show their faces again."

"I see, he's got the style for it. Man of about forty-five, I should say, and plumpish, with a kind of short spoken heartiness about him and a friendly look; you'd take him to be a colonel in the army or a lively kind of country squire. And he's got that trick o' dressing—you know! The minute you see it you know it's the right thing. I've seen him on the Promenade des Anglais at Nice. Two or three of 'em coming along together, General This an' Sir John That an' old Pony all together—Pony don't talkin', too—an' I give you my word that out of the bunch o' them Pony was the one I could have been afraid of an' called 'sir' when I was speakin' to him."

The youth who looked like a jockey coughed conspicuously, wiped his lips, and glanced at his handkerchief as he returned it to his pocket. "Ye-es," he drawled. "Blackmail's his game, then?"

Mr. Smith hesitated. "I dunno," he said thoughtfully. "You can hardly call it blackmailin' when Pony does it. And it isn't his only game, anyhow; Pony never misses a chance. Why, talkin' of Nice, there used to be a feller down there, the Honorable Samuel Barleigh. Young feller he was; son of a lord, but his family had kicked him out, and he spent his time busily and solemnly going to the devil. He was regularly tottering from side to side between delirium tremens and suicide; I never saw such a beastly sight as that chap when he really got going. Well, Pony had a look at him an' put out feelers for information about him an' his people, and when he'd learned all he wanted to know he took charge of him. The Honorable Sam had been in drink cure homes before till most of 'em were sick of him; there didn't seem to be a blue ribbon doctor in the world that could handle him; but Pony was a new experience for the guy lad. Pony took him to some filthy hole on the top of a snowy old Alp where you needed wings for gain' up an' where you were apt to get a harp and a halo, too, when you started to come down, and there he put him through it. He made him do winter sports till he was black an' blue all over; he cut off his liquor, his smokes, an' his dope, and he exercised a friendly influence over him till the Honorable Sam couldn't call his soul his own."

"And in the spring he took him home and presented him to his family. They'd never



seen him before when he wasn't so sodden with booze that he squeaked when he moved, and Pony handed 'em over a lean, leathery young athlete, with nothing wrong with him but an awful way of cursing whenever Pony was mentioned. Were they grateful? They were so grateful that when Pony wanted to get rid o' some copper stock he'd managed to dig up they took it off his hands before he'd finished suggesting it.

"Still," Mr. Smith continued, "talking of blackmail, I'd like to tell you about a queer thing I was in with Pony. 'Twas—"

"Let's have some drinks, then," stipulated the young man who looked like a curate.

Mr. Smith accepted the condition and the drinks were duly served. When the waiter had departed he resumed.

"The game began one day when I was havin' my lunch in the Rochester down the street here. I was alone an' I was just about done and ready to pay my bill an' go when in strolls Pony an' another man that I only know by sight. Pony was like he always is, cheery, masterful, and certain of himself; but the feller with him, a tall, drooping sort of chap, was lookin' sort of ill and worried. I won't tell you his name, 'cos he's still on Pony's list; an' by the looks of him I thought for the moment that Pony must have been milkin' him too hard. Pony nods to me and half stops. 'Don't go away for a minute, Jim,' he says; 'I might want you.'"

"The other one gave me a sort of thoughtful, gloomy look and Pony led him on, whispering to him as they went. They took a table at the other end of the room, and after talkin' together for a few minutes they gave their order to the waiter and Pony looked up and beckoned me over."

"Sit down, Jim," he said to me. "This is Jim Smith," he told the other feller. "Jim, I want you to listen to a story that Lord So-and-so has been tellin' me and see what you think about it. Some of it doesn't sound right to me."

"I'm listening," I said.

"The lord heaved a dreamy kind of sigh. He'd got a great thin beak of a nose and no more chin than a bird. He looked about as strong as a piece of paper and as wise as a sheep. And yet somehow he looked like a lord, as if he'd got more right than another man and air was only made because he liked to breathe it."

"Are you a crook?" he said to me.

"Yes," I answered him. "What's the crooked thing you want done that you can't do yourself?"

"He lifted up his eyebrows and stared at me as if I was a curiosity. Pony, sitting beside him, laughed.

"Jim's all right," he said. "He knows all about rough work. Go ahead and tell him."

"So presently his lordship began to tell his symptoms to the doctor. The first part of 'em seemed natural enough for a sheep-faced village idiot like him. About three weeks before, bein' out for the evening lookin' for new worlds to conquer, he'd run into four nice fellows he'd never seen before. Cherry, pleasant, sporting sort of chaps, three of 'em English and one an American. They'd had a certain amount o' drinks at the usual kind o' places, and at last they'd gone off to the American's flat to rest around a card table after the fatigues of the evening."

"This American was a middle sized man, it seemed, actin' an' talkin' in the usual way; but what made him noticeable and queer looking was his having rather longish black hair, cut French fashion, a black mustache, and a pointed black beard. And in his flat was slathers of drink and the materials for poker."

"It was over the poker, it seemed, that things began to go wrong. His long, lean lordship got the idea at last that he wasn't getting a square deal, just as if it would have needed any funny business to milk a poor fool like him. At any rate, he began to watch things pretty close, as far as the liquors he'd taken would let him."

"And I'll swear," he was telling me, "that the dealing was crooked. That American had the cards, and I distinctly saw him flick a card from the bottom of the pack. I picked up my cards and threw them into the middle of the table."

"We'll have that deal again," I said.

"They all stared at me as if they were

astounded and startled. It was well done, but—he nodded at me like a sleepy horse—"I'm a close observer, don't you know, and I saw through it. 'Why, what's the matter?' asked the American. 'Are you drunk?'"

"No," I said. "Not nearly drunk enough to stand that kind of deal."

"He laid the cards down before him and started to get up. I jumped up, too, and so did the others."

"If you're trying to say I'm not dealing straight," he shouted, and I pointed a finger at him.

"You dealt yourself a card from the bottom of the pack, you sharper," I answered.

"Why, you swine," he shouted. They were all around me and I stepped back against the buffet where the bottles were. And all at once I saw the bearded man with a pistol in his hand. I had my hand on a champagne bottle, and I stepped forward and swung it at him. I got him on the side of the head—a clinking fine bang—and the bottle flew to pieces in my hand and down he went."

Mr. James Smith laughed. "It was funny to see him while he told about it," he said. "Like a little girl tellin' how she killed a nasty big wasp—proud and horrified, you know. But the rest of the story was queer."

"The minute the bearded fellow went down two of the English chaps got hold of his lordship and dragged him back, and the third knelt down above the fallen man. His lordship was still kicking and plunging in the hands of the fellows who were holding him when this third man got up and holds out his hands dripping with blood. 'You've killed him!' he says. 'Let him go now,' he tells the other two. 'We've got to think what to do and think quick!'"

"It staggered his lordship. They let him go and stood all three consulting together in murmurs, while he, stepping slow and on tiptoe, edged forward to look. The body was lying beside the card table on its back. He'd probably never seen a dead man before, or anyhow not one just after he was killed, and one look was enough to turn him sick and faint. It lay with its head on one side, and all the face and hair and beard an' the white shirt front was covered with blood and the carpet all round was a pool of it."

"He reeled against the card table, and the next thing he knew he was sitting in a chair and somebody was feeding him with brandy."

"Well, you've done it," they told him, when he was able to listen. 'You've killed Casey.'"

"He drew a pistol on me," he babbled.

"But they wouldn't have it. 'You're drunk,' they said. 'Casey didn't draw any pistol. If you ain't careful you'll finish under the guillotine.'"

"And the long and short of it is that at last they got 'hip scared to the point where they wanted him. I reckon he got hysterics, as far as I can judge, because, though he didn't remember making them the offer, he found them presently accepting his promise of a thousand pounds apiece to put the body out of sight. They'd find an Apache taxi driver—and Lord knows they wouldn't have to look far for one in Paris—and ride it down to the river and dump it in. And after that they'd say nothing an' the incident 'ud be

closed. An' he, poor fool, between the liquor and the scare, believed that it would."

"Two days later they'd sent him a messenger to draw the three thousand and he paid it over. And here's what struck me as the queerest thing yet: the messenger didn't come with a note to get the money in a sealed packet without knowing what it was all about. No, he was a baldheaded bloke in spectacles who knew everything and had therefore got the right to share in the loot. Though there was only three of them in it, and they sworn to keep their mouths shut, they'd taken in a fourth at the beginning. And since then he'd come again, as anybody might have known he would, and the next day to this he was to ante-up another three thousand."

"I stared at him. To think of all that money with nobody to protect it but a chinless half wit like him. It was—it was tantalizing."

"Well, what'd you think of it, Jim?" asked Pony.

"Simple enough," I said. "This feller Casey's no more dead than I am. And if he was, who's to prove it without any corpse?"

"But there is a corpse," said Pony. "It was fished out and taken to the morgue and identified there. Those fellows sent my friend the official certificate of identification and a copy of the police permit for burial."

"O!" I said. "But who was this Casey, anyhow? I've known two or three Caseys, but if you was to try hittin' any one of them with a bottle after he'd drawn a gun you'd need identifying and buryin'—not him!"

Old Pony nodded. "Yes, there's that, he said, thoughtfully."

"And then," I went on, "it doesn't sound real to me that three poker sharps would need to fiddle a deal so badly as all that in order to squeeze the juice out of his lordship here. And when it was three Englishmen was a doctor to make sure the man was dead so quick? And why have they taken in this messenger chap? And why are they so blamed modest and cheap to deal with?"

"His lordship stared, but old Pony understood. 'I ought to have asked for myself,' he said to him. 'If my little—or bit of information is worth a couple of hundred to you now an' again just to save unpleasantness, this affair, with the guillotine or New Caledonia behind it is worth more than a paltry three thousand now and then. It's worth all you've got. What would you do about this business, Jim?'"

"O, me!" I said. "I'm a rough, rude man. I'd get that messenger into a room an' prevail on him to talk—yes, even if I had to sit him on a stove till he did! I'd want him to tell me which of those three fellows slipped a knife into Casey when he pulled his gun, 'cos I've hit a man with a bottle myself in my time and he didn't bleed so lavish."

"Pony sat thinking for a while. 'First thing is to get a look at this bald headed messenger,' he said. 'One of us might know him by sight. Where have you got to meet him and hand over the money?'"

"It was to be in a certain big café on the boulevard at three in the afternoon."

"We'll be there," said Pony. "And you pretend not to know us. Prob'ly we'll be able to fix things up for you. 'Cos I'm blowed if I'm goin' to have a lot of crooks like this case trespassin' on ground that I discovered for myself."

"He's got the loot an' he'll be gone in a moment," moaned Pony. Then suddenly he clapped his hand to his forehead and gave a sort of whistling about.

"It's him," he said. "It must be—it must be! Gosh, what a genius! Come on, Jim; we'll go over to them now."

"He got up, took his cane and gloves, and strolled across, me with him. I didn't understand at all, but I cleared for action in case a punch should be wanted and held my tongue. Pony was fine-smiling and lofty and more like a colonel than ever. The pair of 'em looked up as we came alongside their table."

"Hullo!" said Pony, affable and off handed. "I didn't know you two knew each other." He nodded to his lordship and then turned to the other. "You're lookin' very well, Casey?"

"There was a moment or two of silence, broken only by the fall of his lordship's jaw. The bald man stared up at Pony as if he was the devil. Pony went on smiling."

"Who—who are you callin' Casey?" demanded the bald man.

"Why, you, o' course," said Pony. "Now, don't you start being silly with me, 'cos I haven't the patience. Sit down, Jim!"

"He pulled himself out a chair and we sat down, one on each side o' the bald man, where he'd have to turn his back on one of us if he wanted to start anything with the other. His lordship was still goggling at the lot of us."

"Well," said Pony, "any complaints? You aren't goin' to call in a policeman, are you, Casey? I wouldn't if I was you."

"My name's not Casey," snarled the other. "The man named Casey is dead and buried, an' this man killed him."

"I know," nodded Pony, "and if you don't want him brought to life in about ten seconds to explain where you got that other corpse you hand over that envelope which his lordship just gave you."

"He laid his open hand flat on the table and waited. The other glared at him, and Pony just smiled at him. Me, I'd rather he'd pull a gun on me than smile at me like that; but then, you see, I know him. And after a bit it worked. The bald man let his breath go in a loud puff and fetched out the envelope and put it in Pony's hand."

"How did you know?" he said in a natural voice.

"His lordship got his thoughts in order at that. 'Are you Casey?' he cried. 'You—you infernal scoundrel. I'll—'"

"Pony turned on him. 'Now, now!' he said. 'What's all this noise? After all the trouble that Jim and I have taken to break out like this! I'm ashamed of you!' It was as if he'd been scolding a noisy child, and Casey—it was him, all right—grinned at it."

"You see," Pony explained to him, "in my humble opinion you overdid it. You were knocked out with a bottle while you'd a gun in your hand, and there was that silly unnecessary deal at poker, and the fact that your three friends, with a gold mine all to themselves, took in a fourth. But the thing that finally gave you away—was—pardon me—that head of yours."

"You see, once I'd got my brains to working, it was clear enough that a long haired man with a beard couldn't choose a better disguise than a head like a bladder of hard. The only thing that still puzzles me is your dead body."

"Casey grinned again. 'Well,' he said, 'maybe there's a better disguise for a man with the police after him than a five braded franc funeral, but it's good enough for me. An' that corpse—it's only a question of biding your time and the Saxe is certain to contribute an unknown Frenchman with a black beard which a few obligin' friends can go along and identify.'"

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"Pony stared at him. 'Give you the money?' he said. 'Why, it isn't yours; you gave it to Mr. Casey here. What the deuce should I give you the money for?'"

"D'you want me to call a policeman in?" he cried.

"Yes!" said Pony and Casey together. "That was enough for him and he shambled off, his very back blaspheming as he went. Pony and Casey and me sat and smiled at each other."

"Well," said Casey, "I suppose we split it fifty-fifty?"

"I suppose not," answered Pony sharply. "There'll be no split in this. His lordship was my private property before you ever heard of him and I'll have no poaching on my preserves, the late Mr. Casey. Remember that, if you please!"

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